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American Naval History, 1607-1865

Jonathan R. Dull

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American Naval History, 1607–1865

Studies in War, Society, and the Military

American Naval History, 1607–1865

Overcoming the Colonial Legacy

JONATHAN R. DULL

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Preface

Although there have been many splendid books on early American naval history, there is a need for a new survey of the subject, particularly one with a broad perspective. This book tries to meet that need. It begins before 1775 because at least until the time of the Civil War American naval history was influenced greatly by attitudes, practices, and conditions dating from American colonial history. It pays attention to other navies, particularly those of Britain and France, because American naval history is closely connected with British and French naval history. Although it can stand alone, it is intended as a companion volume to my book *The Age of the Ship of the Line: The British and French Navies, 1650–1865* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009). Both books are concerned with the ways navies reflect diplomatic, political, economic, and social developments.

Looking at American naval history from a wide perspective helps us to avoid reading the United States Navy's twentieth-century triumphs back into previous centuries. Until the Civil War, America was a minor naval power. During its first two major wars, the War of American Independence and the

War of 1812, the American navy was virtually annihilated. It is true that the navy fought a number of successful combats against individual enemy ships and even won battles on Lake Erie and Lake Champlain during the War of 1812. On balance, however, the record of the American navy during the age of sail was not very impressive, particularly in comparison with the British navy, which twice virtually swept it from the sea. Given America's enormous resources and growing population, its navy generally was undersized and poorly funded. Its participation in the Civil War of 1861–65 was very different. The navy suddenly expanded hugely and performed wonders against an extremely dangerous enemy. Although the navy then languished for a couple of decades, the foundations of American naval power had been established. Once America decided it wanted a modern navy, it was able to build one in fairly short order. In the twentieth century it became first a major naval power and then the world's dominant naval power.

Why did it take almost a century for the United States to build its first large navy? As I will argue, it was largely due to the continuation of traditions established in America's colonial past, such as localism and sectionalism, an obsession with the frontier and territorial expansion, and an aversion to strong central government and taxation. By weakening the power of the states, expanding American industry, and strengthening the federal government, the Lincoln administration finally made possible America's rise as a naval power.

In writing this book I have benefited from the work of numerous fine historians, including my friends John Hattendorf, Bill Fowler, Thomas Schaeper, Denver Brunsman, and Jim Bradford; its mistakes are my own. I also wish all too belatedly to acknowledge the encouragement given to me by a

model naval officer, Lieutenant Commander Jay Arnold, executive officer of the USS *Duncan* (DDR 874), aboard which I served in 1964–66. As with previous books I wish to thank my wonderful family, particularly my wife, Susan Kruger, and children, Veronica Lamka, Robert Dull, Max Kruger-Dull, and Anna Kruger-Dull. I dedicate this book to two history buffs, my nephews Peter and John Hamburger.

American Naval History, 1607–1865

ONE

The American Colonies and the British Navy, 1607–1775

1

The naval great powers during the age of sailing ship warfare that ended in the middle of the nineteenth century were, with the exception of Great Britain, not those of the great age of battleship and aircraft carrier warfare during the first half of the twentieth century. The other great sailing navies, those of France, Spain, and the Netherlands, played a relatively minor role during the twentieth century. Instead the British navy was joined by three newly arrived naval great powers: Japan, Germany, and the United States. All three launched major building programs during the final decades of the nineteenth century and quickly became prominent once the United States defeated Spain in 1898 and Japan defeated Russia in 1904–1905. The groundwork for this ascendancy was laid earlier, however. In the middle of the nineteenth century the governments of Germany, Japan, and the United States greatly increased their power. Henceforth they were able to use their economic growth to become naval great powers. The equivalent of the German unification of 1871 and Japan's Meiji Restoration of 1867–68 was the American Civil War.

Although the two decades after the end of the Civil War were a period of naval retrenchment, the Civil War had laid the foundation for the United States to overcome the attitudes, practices, and conditions that had hindered the growth of its navy. These hindrances were part of the legacy of America's colonial past.

Between the founding of Jamestown in 1607 and the beginning of the American Revolution in 1775, Britain's American colonies developed important shipping and fishing industries but undertook little independent naval activity. This period of subservience to the mother country and to the needs of the British navy was very influential, however, in the subsequent development of the American navy. The Revolution did not eliminate America's colonial legacy. For the United States to become a naval power, it had to overcome a number of the things it inherited from its colonial past: a weak industrial base compared with naval great powers like Britain and France, a distrust of government and hence a reliance on private enterprise, sectionalism and a preference for state government rather than national government, an inability or reluctance to raise by taxation the money necessary for military and naval activity, and an obsession with internal expansion that necessitated a substantial investment on the frontier rather than on the sea. All of these obstacles were present almost from the beginning of English settlement in North America.

II

The English colonization of North America began in 1607 (after earlier failures); the first permanent French colony was established a year later. Both Virginia and New France began as private business investments approved by the respective

crowns. This was a change from the sixteenth-century Spanish model in which the rulers of Castile and Aragon played (at least in theory) a direct role in exploration and colonization. Soon, however, the French colony was taken over by the royal government and administered from Europe. In contrast the more than a dozen English colonies established between 1607 and 1732 differed not only from the colonies of other nations but even from one another.[1] Some colonies like Connecticut had their own charters and administered their own affairs under very loose government supervision. Others like Pennsylvania were run by proprietors, who had veto power over the decisions reached by their colonial assemblies. Still others like Virginia became royal colonies with a governor appointed by the crown. Even royal governors, however, had to share power with their locally elected assemblies, which, like the English House of Commons (or, after the 1707 union with Scotland, the British House of Commons), used their control over the budget to gain a share of political power.[2]

Over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the struggle for power between assemblies and their governors or proprietors left many Americans distrustful of executive authority; even the inhabitants of Connecticut and Rhode Island, where governors were popularly elected, distrusted the kings of England, who might take their charters from them. Moreover, the British government exercised its own veto power over most colonial legislation, using it, for example, to control the issuing of currency by individual colonies. Until the middle of the eighteenth century, however, British control over the North American colonies was administered loosely, largely because Britain was preoccupied with European affairs.[3] These colonies also were considered less

important than the rich sugar-producing colonies of the Caribbean, such as Jamaica. Thus most American politics was local, and American political life, like American society, was dominated by wealthy local elites who resented interference from England.

The North American colonies were diverse not only politically but also socially, economically, culturally, and religiously, although over the course of the eighteenth century these differences became less marked.[4] A planter in the South using slaves to raise tobacco or rice for European markets had, for example, different views on politics and economics than did a small farmer in New England producing for a local market. The colonies did trade among themselves (usually by sea because long distances and primitive roads made it difficult and expensive to move products by land), but generally Great Britain and the Caribbean were their most important markets and the chief sources of their imports. Moreover, except for a relatively efficient intercolonial postal system, the American colonies lacked common institutions. What they did share was a desire for expansion into new lands. All too often this led to competition rather than cooperation, such as the attempted intrusions by Virginia and Connecticut into parts of Pennsylvania. Even in military matters, cooperation between colonies often was halfhearted or ineffectual.

War was a recurrent part of life in British North America. Most wars were fought against the Native American nations whose hunting grounds or agricultural settlements were coveted by British Americans. In the early days of settlement, the colonies were not self-supporting and depended on supplies sent from England by sea. Soon, however, they achieved a measure of self-sufficiency. They were able to fight Indian wars using

troops they raised themselves. Fortunately for them, Indian opposition in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries was uncoordinated. Unlike the powerful sixteenth-century Aztec Empire of Mexico or the Inca Empire of Peru, the Indians encountered by the British were divided into many small tribes or confederations of tribes. By the late seventeenth century few contained more than 10,000 people. The colonists were able to exploit rivalries between the various Indian nations as well to make use of their own greater population and advanced weaponry.

More challenging, however, were wars conducted against neighboring Dutch, Spanish, and French colonies. These sometimes involved the use of ships. Seldom were enemy warships encountered, but for logistical reasons colonial wars often involved moving troops by sea, usually on transports provided by colonies like Massachusetts. Until the so-called French and Indian War of 1754–60, most soldiers in British America served in either the militia or colonial regiments. Their frequent target was the French colony of Acadia, located across the Bay of Fundy from Massachusetts. It was captured on several occasions by New England raiders, but until the 1713 Treaty of Utrecht it was returned to France each time that hostilities ended.

The French colonies initially were less of an obstacle to the English colonies than was the Dutch colony of New Netherland along the Hudson River, which separated the New England colonies from English colonies to the south. In 1664, during the second of three wars fought between the Netherlands and Britain in the mid-seventeenth century, a small English squadron captured the city of New Amsterdam and renamed it New York. During the next war a Dutch squadron recaptured the

city and colony.[5] Fortunately for the English, the colony was returned to England when the war ended in 1674.

The Glorious Revolution of 1688 made William of Orange, ruler of the Netherlands, and his wife, Mary, daughter of the deposed James II, joint rulers of England. William's archenemy, Louis XIV of France, immediately became the enemy of England and soon went to war on behalf of the exiled James. The Nine Years' War (1689–97) was fought chiefly in Europe, but the New England colonies also participated. In 1690 they even mounted an attack against Quebec, the capital of New France, but the attack failed.[6]

The War of the Spanish Succession began in 1702. Another attack on Quebec was made in 1711, but most of the troops and the supporting warships were sent from England. Because of the ineptitude of the British commander, several transports were wrecked while ascending the St. Lawrence, and the attack was abandoned. An attack on Port Royal, the capital of Acadia, was successful, however. At the end of the war, Acadia was retained by Britain, although its borders were not defined in the 1713 peace treaty.[7] This treaty also confirmed both the accession of Louis's grandson to the Spanish throne and the retention of Florida by Spain. (During the war, troops from South Carolina had made an unsuccessful attack on the Spanish fort at St. Augustine while their Indian allies attacked the Spanish fort at Pensacola.)[8]

Soon after the war ended, France and Britain became allies. Tension in North America did not disappear, although it was moderated by the powerful Iroquois confederation, which acted as a buffer between the British and French colonies.[9] The French, meanwhile, built the large fortified city of Louisbourg on Isle Royale (now Cape Breton Island) as a shelter

and support for their fishing fleet used in the Newfoundland and St. Lawrence fisheries.[10]

Thus far the North American colonies had played only a minor role in the great wars of Europe. Except for the abortive 1711 attack on Quebec, no large fleets had come to North American waters. Nonetheless, Britain's North American colonies did make significant, although mostly indirect, contributions to British naval strength. The ways in which the colonies did and did not participate in naval warfare affected the American navy once the colonies asserted their independence.

III

Most contemporaries saw trade between the British colonies and Britain itself as the major colonial contribution to British naval strength. The mother country's Navigation Acts channeled much of the colonies' overseas trade to the British West Indies or to Great Britain, as well as restricting that trade to ships built and manned in Britain or its colonies. The purpose of the Navigation Acts was threefold. They enriched the British treasury, fostered the development of the British economy, and provided for the training of British sailors. (It was too expensive for Britain's navy to maintain a large peacetime fleet for training purposes, so most sailors in the navy received their training aboard merchant ships or fishing vessels; the same, of course, was true for the French and Spanish navies.) By 1775, perhaps a quarter of British shipping tonnage was devoted to trade with British North America and the British West Indies; moreover, nearly a third of British merchant ships had been built in America, where shipbuilding costs were less than in Britain.[11]

The American colonies made other important contributions

to the mother country. They supplied raw materials, such as indigo for dying fabric, and were an increasingly important market for British manufactures and services such as banking. American grain, meat, and fish were vital to feeding the British West Indies, which devoted almost all their acreage to crops for export such as sugar. Masts from New England and naval stores such as pitch, tar, and turpentine from the southern colonies were used by the British navy.[12] Colonial troops not only conducted military operations in North America but also assisted British troops in the Caribbean.

Although the British colonies in North America were important to the British economy in general and the navy in particular, there were certain areas in which they were not given the chance to contribute, were not capable of contributing, or did not choose to contribute. This would hinder naval development once America became independent.

First, the American colonies were given few opportunities to build warships for the British navy because their ships had a poor reputation for durability; the colonies, however, were allowed to repair British warships and to convert merchant ships into warships. Although the British navy contracted to build many warships in private dockyards in Great Britain, it purchased only a few frigates (medium-sized warships of 22 to 44 guns) from American shipyards and none of the larger ships of the line that were the chief component of naval power.[13] The French built a couple of 60-gun ships of the line at Quebec, as well as some smaller ships, but these were poorly constructed. The only shipbuilding facility in the Western Hemisphere comparable to the great dockyards of Europe was at Havana, where the Spaniards, with access to tropical hardwoods, built some of the finest warships in the world.[14] The

specialty of the British colonies was the privateer, a privately built, owned, and manned but government-sanctioned armed vessel used chiefly to capture enemy merchant ships. These were built for speed rather than endurance, and served only during wartime. Hundreds of American privateers were used during the wars of 1739–48 and 1756–63 against France and Spain. Although privateers also were used during the American Revolution, American shipyards then also had to build sturdy, heavily armed warships to match those of the British.[15]

Second, the economy of the British colonies was underdeveloped by Western European standards, partly because the British preferred to see them as providers of raw material and customers for British products rather than as rivals. Thus in 1775 there were only three iron foundries in New England capable of casting cannon for warships.[16] Americans also were short of gunpowder, cannon balls, and other necessities of naval warfare. The colonies' greatest shortage, however, was specie, the gold or silver necessary to provide financial backing for currency. When the colonies revolted against Britain, their first response was simply to print money without backing, the same response the Confederacy would adopt in 1861. In both cases the result was inflation and the eventual destruction of the currency's purchasing power. The American Revolution was saved from disaster by financial aid from abroad, but the American revolutionary navy, virtually unable to pay its sailors or replace its ship losses, faded into insignificance.

Third, although many Americas served aboard merchant ships or fishing boats, few had served as sailors in the British navy, and almost none had served as officers or naval administrators; only three of the American navy's original twenty-six captains had any prior experience in the British navy.[17] The

British navy periodically attempted to force American merchant sailors to serve (an imposition called impressment), but the Americans, claiming to be exempt from such service, refused. They received support from public officials and from crowds that often resorted to intimidation or even violence. Usually the British gave up the effort.[18] Merchant sailors could learn fairly quickly how to adjust to life aboard privateers or warships, so this was not a long-term obstacle to the development of an American navy. It was far more difficult, however, to turn merchant ship or privateer officers into naval officers. This problem would also face the French navy during the French Revolution, but it at least had a few veteran captains and other officers who were willing to serve. The first American navy had no one who had commanded a squadron of ships, let alone a fleet.[19] George Washington had the help of former British army officers like Charles Lee and Horatio Gates and foreign volunteers like "Baron" von Steuben and the marquis de Lafayette; the navy had only Pierre Landais, an emotionally unstable former French junior officer. It would take considerable time to develop officers capable of commanding a group of ships in combat.

IV

Except for brief hostilities against Spain (and against pirates) in the 1720s, Britain was at peace from 1713 until 1739. North America was a backwater for the British navy, which did little more than assign station ships, none larger than a frigate, to Boston, New York, Charleston, Virginia, and eventually Savannah.[20] The colonies did not have permanent armies or navies, and there was not even a maritime equivalent to the rudimentary military training provided by colonial militias.

This period of peace ended when Britain declared war against Spain in 1739. The colonies participated enthusiastically, but the initial results were disastrous. Thousands of American provincial troops joined British troops in an attack on the fortified seaport of Cartagena de Indias on the northern coast of South America. The attack, supported by a very large British fleet, failed, and many of the Americans died of disease. Provincial troops from Georgia and South Carolina supported by British frigates also were unsuccessful in an attack on St. Augustine.[21] The Spaniards attempted to retaliate with an attack on Georgia in preparation for an attack on South Carolina, but the other British colonies were not threatened except by Spanish privateers. When France entered the war in 1744, New York and the New England colonies were menaced by attack from the Indian allies of New France. Massachusetts governor William Shirley organized an army of New England provincial troops to attack the great fortress of Louisbourg. Although he was able to assemble a troop convoy and arrange an escort of Massachusetts navy vessels, he needed the assistance of the British navy. He appealed for help to Commodore Peter Warren, who commanded a small squadron at Antigua in the British West Indies. Warren had spent many years in America, had an American wife, and had participated in the St. Augustine attack. He brought two small ships of the line and two frigates to Nova Scotia, where he rendezvoused with the New Englanders. The attack on Louisbourg caught the French by surprise, and the city was captured after a seven-week siege. British Americans had won their first great battle, albeit with the help of the British navy. To their disappointment Louisbourg was returned to France when peace was concluded in 1748, but the border between the British and French colonies remained tense.[22]

Neither the British nor the French government wished for another war, but the situation in North America was volatile. As in 1713, the peace negotiations had failed to define the limits of Acadia and had left the task of delineating the border between New France (including Canada and Acadia) and the British colonies to a bilateral border commission. The British and French governments failed to come to a general agreement on the issues between them, and the commission's discussions proved more divisive than helpful.[23] The recent war had disrupted French trade with Indian nations south of the Great Lakes. British American traders and land companies moved to fill the vacuum. A group of Virginia land speculators sought to open western Pennsylvania to settlement. This led to armed confrontations between Canadian troops and Virginia volunteers near what today is Pittsburgh. Subsequent negotiations between the British and French governments failed to resolve the dispute. In 1755 both governments sent troops to North America, and open hostilities soon began.[24]

The British colonies were unprepared for war. As recent events had demonstrated, they did not even respect one another's borders. Benjamin Franklin proposed that the colonies establish a joint military command, but his suggestion was rejected by both the British government and colonial assemblies.[25]

The new war was far wider in scope than previous colonial wars. The British and French sent regular infantry battalions and large fleets to North America. Their respective colonists played a subordinate role in the war, although large numbers of Canadian and American volunteers and militiamen served beside the regulars; during the decisive campaign of 1759, for example, almost 20,000 American troops served with a similar number of British soldiers, while some 10,000 Canadian

militiamen were among the 15,000 troops opposing them.[26] Recruitment of American provincial troops was greatly aided by the British government's willingness to partly subsidize them, thereby neutralizing American suspicion, disunity, and reluctance to raise taxes. A major factor in the eventual British triumph was the overwhelming numerical superiority of the British navy. The colonists did provide troop transports for an unsuccessful attack on Louisbourg in 1757, but many transports for the successful campaigns of the following two years against Louisbourg and Quebec were sent to American ports from England. Most American sailors worked aboard merchant ships or privateers.

Other British attacks such as those against Fort Niagara and Montreal made use of waterways such as Lake Ontario, Lake George, Lake Champlain, and the St. Lawrence River.[27] The ships ranged from small boats to warships carrying as many as 18 cannon. This was an important precedent; significant naval actions on inland waters would occur during the wars of 1775–83, 1812–15, and 1861–65.

V

The war ended with the French being driven from the North American continent. The British victory, however, was even more destabilizing than had been the indecisive previous war. It was followed almost immediately by a major Indian war in 1763–64. Worse still, it disrupted relations between the British colonists and the government in Britain. For several decades the government in London had used the colonies as a source of patronage, while allowing colonial legislatures a considerable degree of autonomy. It had angered American colonists by, among other things, restricting their manufacturing

certain items and restricting their issuing currency. This was counterbalanced, however, by the protection afforded them by the British navy, as well as by their pride in being British subjects. They protested when they felt rules were being violated, such as by impressment of sailors in American ports, but generally their yoke was light enough to be tolerated. Benjamin Franklin, for example, sent to England by the Pennsylvania Assembly to seek redress against Pennsylvania proprietor Thomas Penn, considered himself simultaneously a Briton, an American, and a Pennsylvanian. He even lobbied to make Pennsylvania a royal colony.[28]

The war, however, altered the relationship between Britain and its American colonies. With the French threat gone, Americans no longer needed Britain for protection from European enemies (and came to see the British army as less a protection from Indians than as a menace to themselves). The war, moreover, had caused the British to adopt new policies such as sending British troops to America and had added greatly to the British national debt. The British government now expected the colonies to help bear the heavy cost of policing the frontier. Furthermore, British authorities were outraged at the colonists for their massive illegal trade with the French West Indies during the war against France.[29] They now took action to curtail smuggling and to force compliance with the Navigation Acts, including the deployment of a large number of small warships in American waters.[30] Americans attempted to evade British trade restrictions and even retaliated against British warships, including burning the schooner *Gaspee* (one of fifteen such ships purchased in America by the British navy between 1764 and 1775).[31] They began to view Parliament as corrupt, more as a tyrannical European government than as a protector of their interests.

The decisive event in the breakdown of relations between Britain and its colonies was the so-called Boston Tea Party of December 1773. This destruction of tea sent to America by the British East India Company prompted Parliament to retaliate by passing the Coercive Acts, including the closing of Boston Harbor and numerous other American ports. Americans began preparing for armed resistance, smuggling gunpowder from Europe and the West Indies, and seizing cannon from minor British military posts.[32] Open hostilities began in April 1775 when a British army detachment from Boston attempted to seize gunpowder from the neighboring towns of Lexington and Concord. Americans now faced not only the British army in Boston but the entire British navy. They would also have to deal with the legacies of their own past: rivalries among the different states and regions of the country, distrust of central government, a preference for printing money rather than paying taxes, a shortage of leaders with experience in European-style military and naval warfare, a rudimentary bureaucracy, and an unevenly developed economy.